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Pols Face a Coronavirus Test

Who's leading and who's seeking political advantage? Here are the answers.



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Crises have a way of separating the leaderlike wheat from the opportunistic chaff. Coronavirus is the crisis of our time, and the political winnowing is something to behold.

Example: The Trump administration spent this week distributing ventilators, standing up small-business loans, dispatching hospital ships, erecting alternate care facilities, explaining virus modeling, revamping regulations to keep truckers on the road, and plastering the airwaves with information about hygiene and social distancing. Speaker Nancy Pelosi spent this week setting up a new House committee to investigate Donald Trump.



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Nothing separates the shallow from the serious faster than high-stakes moments. At the federal level, Americans are seeing the serious in the White House task force briefings that provide daily updates on the government's actions. When this is all over, we will find that the federal

response was far from perfect. But we'll also see that once the executive branch grasped the enormity of the problem, it moved with soberness, speed and a spirit of cooperation.

Mr. Trump is at the head of this operation, and while his leadership style isn't for everyone, he's certainly leading. He addresses the virus in stark terms but also insists on optimism—something that's important from

leaders in tough times. While punching back at some critics, he's also reached across the aisle. He embraced Democratic calls for more-stringent corporate rules in Congress's relief bill. Asked about the \$25 million Democrats slipped in for the Kennedy Center, he defended it: "I really believe that we've had a very good back and forth." He's rushed to the aid of blue-state governors, and has praised Democratic state leaders, including New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and California Gov. Gavin Newsom, for their efforts.

And at least some of those Democratic state leaders are reciprocating, proving neither party has a monopoly on character. CNN's Jake Tapper this week practically begged Mr. Newsom to recant his recent praise for the president, suggesting the Democrat had given it only out of fear that Mr. Trump would "punish" his state's citizens. Mr. Newsom was having none of it. "The fact is, every time I've called the president he's quickly gotten on the line," he said. "There's just too many Americans—40 million that live in this state—that deserve us to get together and get along." Mr. Cuomo has taken the same approach, saying of president: "His team is on it. They've been responsive." He added: "I want to say thank you." This week he chided partisans: "Not now," he said. "The virus doesn't attack and kill red Americans or blue Americans—it attacks and kills all Americans."

Contrast this with Mrs. Pelosi, who seems to view the pandemic as one big political opportunity. She held up last week's relief bill for days, attempting to cram into it unrelated election and climate provisions. She used a Sunday CNN appearance to accuse Mr. Trump of killing Americans. This week she announced a new special House committee that will "examine all aspects of the federal response to the coronavirus" and will have subpoena power. This is yet the latest Democratic machinery for investigating Trump and ginning up scandals.

Or contrast the governors with the guy carping from his Delaware basement. Joe Biden might have used this moment to buttress his claims to be the more dignified candidate by throwing his support behind the federal effort and making clear he'd save his policy disputes for later. He instead spread the false claim that the president had called the virus a "hoax." Mr. Biden has bashed Mr. Trump on testing and on the use of the Defense Production Act. He's accused the president of "failing to prepare our nation" for a pandemic (never mind the Obama-Biden role in any such failure). He even blames Mr. Trump for soaring unemployment numbers.

Or contrast the governors who are leading with the one who is using today's crisis as an audition to be Mr. Biden's running mate. For every Mr. Cuomo there is a Gretchen Whitmer. The Michigan Democrat has spent weeks accusing the administration of failing to have a "national strategy," and of

“cuts to the CDC” that put us “behind the eight ball.” She’s insisted “we’re still not getting what we need from the federal government,” and even insinuated the administration was directing suppliers to withhold equipment to her state—a ludicrous suggestion.

Democratic partisans are playing a risky game here. Mr. Trump is currently clocking the best approval ratings of his presidency, and a late March Gallup poll found 60% of respondents approve of his virus response. Americans have traditionally looked dimly on those who undercut presidents and other elected leaders in time of crisis. Some on the left are making it easy to separate the politicians who are fighting for their people from the politicians who are fighting for their self-interest. That may come back to haunt them in November.

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